

# Who Eats What, When, Where, and Why?

Microeconomics is all about choices: It's the study of why individuals choose to buy goods and services, and how these choices are revealed through the workings of the market. The study of food choices is challenging for economists because these choices are so personal to consumers. Food choices depend not just on prices and income, but also on such individualized factors as taste, family structure and traditions, age, health, and lifestyle. When we economists are asked how much information we need to research how food choices respond to changes in socioeconomic conditions, we're like Oliver Twist at mealtime: "Please sir, I want some more!"

A case in point: New *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* have just been released, providing authoritative advice on good dietary habits that can promote health and reduce risk for major chronic diseases. Will Americans follow the recommendations and make healthier food and lifestyle choices? And if they do, how will these food choices be reflected in the marketplace? What will changing food choices mean for American agriculture? Economic research can help answer these questions.

ERS is meeting this challenge with a new data-collection initiative. In fiscal year 2005, ERS received funding to develop an integrated, comprehensive data and analysis framework of the post-farm food system. The framework will identify and track changes in food supply and consumption patterns and help us to understand those changes. It will also help us explore the relationship between consumers' knowledge and attitudes and their eating patterns. We are also developing the Flexible Consumer Behavior Survey (FCBS) that will complement the Department of Health and Human Services' National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), which provides information on food and nutrient intake and health status. The FCBS will provide information needed to assess linkages among individuals' knowledge and attitudes about dietary guidance and food safety and their economic circumstances, food choices, and nutrient intakes. Combining the NHANES with this new survey will allow us to analyze how individual behavior, information, and economic factors affect food choices, dietary status, and health outcomes.

The *Guidelines* tell what our food choices need to be, but we still need to figure out how to get there, how long it will take, and what changes are at stake for American agriculture. Understanding eating behavior is key to developing a solution to our Nation's obesity problem. Our investment in people, tools, and information will help us find the right mix of policies to move us toward meeting the *Guidelines*. Future issues of *Amber Waves* will report new findings from our food consumption research, so stay tuned.



Stephen R. Crutchfield  
Deputy Director for Staff Analysis and Communications  
Food and Rural Economics Division, ERS

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Send questions, requests, and letters to Sheila Sankaran, Editor, *Amber Waves*, USDA/ERS, Rm. N4165, 1800 M St., NW., Washington, DC 20036-5831, or to ssankaran@ers.usda.gov.

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